

but words left unspoken (left us so brittle) by FaroresFlame

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Summary: There was something inside of Will, quiet enough that he could ignore it most of the time. It started to grow louder, though, ceasing to bother hiding itself. It manifested itself in the ways he wasn't like other kids, in the knot he got in his stomach when his friends talked about girls and he felt like he couldn't say anything without someone seeing right through him.

1. Chapter 1

(a/n)- I started writing snippets of this after season two came out but then I kind of forgot it existed until the first trailer for season three was released and I rewatched the series. This won't be compliant with anything we've seen of season three although some things may have been intentionally or not inspired by parts of the trailers.

I haven't read the comics or any supplementary material so some things in here may contradict them.

The title comes from "Precious" by Depeche Mode.

I do not own Stranger Things or any of these characters.

When Will's father still lived in their house, Will had a habit of hiding whenever Lonnie got mad. At least, that was if he was able to escape before it was too late. Sometimes he wasn't able to, sometimes his father's mood would turn sour in a split second and before he knew it Lonnie was already there with a hand fisted in Will's shirt, preventing him from getting away, harsh words spitting from his snarled mouth. If Will's mom saw it she would get furious at Lonnie and the yelling would start, giving Will the chance to slip away. If she and Jonathan were both gone, however, Will was left alone at the mercy of his father.

In the times that he was able to escape Will would hide under the bed or in the closet, in cupboards and behind furniture. Anywhere that he could fit. He was small, even for a kid, and he could squeeze into tight spots and be quiet enough that he wouldn't be found. Will was good at being quiet.

Sometimes, Will would flee to the woods around his house even though his mom didn't like him going out there alone yet. Will found that the crisp air helped him breathe and slow his hammering heart. It was always the riskier option. Even he wasn't good enough to blend in with the trees or hide the sounds of his footfalls.

When Will did hide, though, Lonnie couldn't find him. He was safe.

Then, years later, trapped in the frightening place that was like home but wasn't, Will found himself seeking out some of the same hiding places that he hadn't needed to use since he was five years old. The monster wasn't his father but he almost felt like a little kid again all the same, carefully peering out when he felt brave enough and holding his breath when he didn't.

At first, Will stuck to the distorted version of his own house. Everything there was slimy and unpleasant and the very air was harsh to breathe in. As he inhaled it scraped against his throat, filled his chest, and ached.

Sometimes Will could hear his mom, even see her, though only faintly. Like a shadow of herself was there with him. Or a ghost. Her panic and fear was still palpable to Will, though, and he wished desperately that he could tell her, "I'm here, Mom, I'm right here," just so she would stop worrying.

However, she couldn't see or hear him no matter how hard he tried. Even when he was right next to her, speaking as firmly and loudly as he dared with a monster lurking around.

By accident Will found out that he could control the lights if he concentrated hard enough, that his mom could even see them. He used that to communicate with her and though there was still a disconnect (as if they were in different dimensions, Will thought), it was still her and she knew that he was still alive, that he was there with her.

At one point Will could see his mom through the wall, which had become red and transparent like glass but unyielding. This time she didn't look like a ghost, she was *right there*, and Will wanted desperately to touch her, to hide in her arms, to hug her back just as fiercely as she would hug him. However, the barrier between them closed again, much too quickly. His mom's face disappeared and Will was alone in the empty place with the monster again.

Eventually the monster, looming and hungry, even more frightening than the creatures he and his friends fought in their games, got better

at finding. That was when Will fled to Castle Byers in desperation.

The monster miraculously didn't find Will at Castle Byers for a long time. He knew that he wasn't any safer from the monster there than anywhere else but Will felt like it held some sort of protective spell all the same. As if the sign outside, "all friends welcome", warded the monster away.

Will spent a lot of time alone in the safe haven he had built with his brother, trying to ignore how it was corrupted like the rest of the world. He thought about rain and bruised fingers, about Jonathan staying up all night with him when his father couldn't even stand being in the same house anymore. He thought about his mom. How she would visit him at Castle Byers and it never felt like she was intruding or imposing on his space, merely sharing it.

Will stayed in Castle Byers willingly until he physically couldn't leave anymore, even if he wanted to. Time passed by either sluggishly or much too fast; he wasn't sure. There was no day or night here, just dim greys and blues all the time. The only indication that any time had passed at all had been when he'd see his mom, or even the monster. Now it was just him.

Will didn't sleep when the monster had stalked him in his house and he wasn't sure if he slept in Castle Byers. He would close his eyes and hours or seconds could've passed before he opened them again.

Slime stuck to Will like a second skin. He found he didn't care anymore.

He was in constant pain; he was hungry and thirsty and so, so tired and his body ached but it all became a distant sensation to him after a while. Will wanted nothing more than to keep his eyes closed and shrivel up right there, to let this alien place claim him as its own.

He didn't. He tried not to. Will was too weak to move but he still had his mind even if it was dizzy and slipping. He was Will the Wise. He would never give up that easily.

Then, someone said something to him. He heard his name. At least he

thought that he did. He didn't know who else would be there, who else would be able to see him except for the monster. Maybe he did sleep after all, maybe this was a dream. Then, Will felt a hand take a hold of his own, so warm that it felt like a brand on his skin. "Your mom. She's coming for you," a voice said to him, soft and careful.

His mom. He saw her in his mind but she was all blurry around the edges.

"H- hurry," he tried to say, not sure if the words made their way past his trembling lips.

"Just- just hold on a- a little longer," was the last thing that Will heard. When he became aware again, they were gone but the warmth on his hand lingered.

Will tried to hold on, he really did. However, the world faded in and out, beyond his control. At some point he thought maybe he was being moved, away from the castle and away from safety. By what, he wasn't sure. Then, eventually, everything faded away and there was nothing.

Will tried to hold on, he really did. However, the world faded in and out, beyond his control. At some point he thought maybe he was being moved, away from the castle and away from safety. By what, he wasn't sure. Then, eventually, everything faded away and there was nothing.

Then there was light and white walls and white ceilings and it was all so brilliant that it hurt his eyes.

Will got pulled out of the place that the others called the Upside Down. He lived.

They called him brave. Hopper, his friends, Jonathan, his mom smiling with her eyes just a bit sad, hovering close and stroking his hair and calling him her "brave boy" like he was still a little kid crawling into her bed after a nightmare.

Will listened to stories about Eleven- El- and decided that she was the

one who was brave. She was *there* for everyone and she scarified herself to beat the monster. She didn't hesitate to cast Fireball even at the cost she had to pay.

(Mike was adamant that El was still out there, somewhere, but every time he insisted it Dustin and Lucas just looked at him with something like pity.)

Will hadn't done anything like that. He just hid, like always. What was so brave about running away? If El hadn't told them all about it, about the Upside Down and the gates, if Hopper and his mom hadn't found him, Will would have died cold and alone there and his real body would've never been found.

Secretly, Will thought he was actually a coward but nobody wanted to admit it to his face. That was fine, though. He was just happy to be home again.

The day he woke up in the hospital, after his friends had left, Will asked his mom if he could draw. She managed to get a pencil and some paper from the hospital administration for him to use until she could bring him his supplies from home. The sensation of a pencil in his hand had become somewhat foreign after a week without it but the muscle memory kicked in after some work and his lines gradually became less shaky.

After warming up he drew Will the Wise. He'd done it so many times at this point that the shapes were easy, familiar. Will frowned. He'd been playing with the idea of modifying the character after their campaign ended. The one they never finished before he'd been taken.

Will drew a new design. He was a cleric instead of wizard. He could not only protect the party but heal them as well. To go with his new class, Will drew Will the Wise as younger, a bit more like himself but still old and wise. Will frowned down at the paper and wondered if he liked it, if it fit. He put the drawing next to his bedside, face down, to look at later.

Ever since he could hold a crayon, Will loved art. It fascinated him

how he could just take a piece of paper and a pencil and create something with them, that he could manifest something that only existed in his own mind and show it to others. Dragons and wizards and magic spells weren't real but when Will put the finishing touches on a piece he was proud of, they almost felt like they were.

He first drew Will the Wise one day when he was in third grade. Will the Wise was incredibly powerful; old and smart and nobody dared to push him around. He didn't need to hide from anything. Shyly, Will had shown Mike his drawing the next day and Mike's eyes had become wide in awe. When he'd said, "Will, this is *awesome*," with all of the enthusiasm of a nine-year-old, Will thought he may never be happier. After that, Mike came up with stories for Will the Wise; his sweeping adventures and the hardships he braved. Mike had always been good at telling stories like that.

Lucas liked the stories too and came up with a character himself, a companion to Will the Wise. A friend. The three of them crafted ideas for their characters, though it felt like something was missing until they met Dustin Henderson the next year and he arrived at Mike's basement one day with dog-eared copies of *The Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide* in tow.

The monster loomed over them, impossibly tall, sharp teeth gleaming. Will the Wise did not cower, he did not hide, for he knew that the monster was no match for him as his friends. Around him, his friends were likewise immovable in their determination. This wasn't the first fearsome creature they had faced together and it wouldn't be the last.

That night, once he was alone in the quiet hospital room, Will laid in the hospital bed and wondered what Will the Wise did after the final big battle in a campaign. He'd never really thought about it. Usually, the session lasted longer than Mike had planned it to be and the party would celebrate briefly before everyone headed home, in high spirits after a hard-won fight. Then, Mike would get to work planning a new campaign and it would all start again.

Will liked pretending to fight monsters but he didn't want *this* to happen again. He just wanted to rest.

Will spent a long time in the hospital. His friends visited him as much as they could between school and homework, family dinners, and the hospital visitation rules. They would tell him what was going on at school or new ideas they had for future campaigns. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin stopped talking about the week that Will was in the Upside Down as much until it was hardly ever brought up. It still lingered there in the background, something that none of them could truly ignore, but they skirted around it as best as they could. When Will was by himself he sometimes wondered if they had been told not to talk about it. Maybe everybody thought that if he heard about it, he would freak out.

Every day, Will looked forward to when his friends would come, to give him new people to talk to and break up the monotony his days had fallen into. He spent most of his time sitting on his hospital bed and reading or drawing, sometimes catching up on his schoolwork. Nurses would come in several times a day to check in on him and occasionally he'd go on walks around the hospital or do exercises to build his strength back up. Will got worn out easily now, though, sometimes even when he was just talking to his friends. When he did, his mom or one of the nurses would come in and gently suggest that they let him rest. Will resented that a bit but he couldn't deny that he was still so tired. Not drowsy exactly, but exhausted in a bone-deep way that sleeping hadn't been able to shake off yet.

Will's mom spent the most time with him out of anybody, though even she was restricted by the hospital's visitation rules and her own work schedule. He was sure she would stay there all day and night with him if she could, making sure he wouldn't disappear again. Sometimes he wished she could and sometimes he was glad to have space to breathe.

Jonathan came too, bringing music with him that they played quietly so that they didn't get in trouble. Jonathan made him a new mixtape and hearing the hand-picked songs raised his spirits a little. While they listened to the music, Jonathan and Will would talk. Not about anything in particular, really. Music, movies, things going on around town. Sometimes they talked about the Upside Down. Unlike his friends, Jonathan didn't skirt around the topic. He listened to Will as

Will told him what had happened and he in turn talked about the week that Will was gone, if a bit haltingly. It felt nice to have what happened be acknowledged. Still, they had to talk in whispers.

A few times, Nancy came with Jonathan to visit and Will wondered when that had happened. He knew Nancy, of course, she was his best friend's sister and she had always been nice to him. They never really interacted very much, though. He also didn't think he'd ever seen Nancy and Jonathan talk to each other beyond awkward, polite greetings before this. Now, they stood close together and occasionally shared significant glances. When Will asked, Jonathan told him that he and Nancy had gone "monster hunting" together. That sort of explained it but not really.

Even Chief Hopper came to see Will. Will never knew him very well but he'd been told about how hard Hopper looked for him. Now, he talked to Will as if he knew him for years. As if he cared about him. Will felt like it was weird at first, but the more Hopper came to visit the more normal it became. He was still a little scary, a little gruff, but he had a way of speaking to Will that was unexpectedly gentle while managing not to be condescending.

Will ended up spending more time in the hospital than he had in the Upside Down. After a while, though, he was released and brought home. He was impatient to be back but then when he walked into the front door of his house, he froze up. Jonathan had told him earlier that they'd cleaned it up for him and everything looked almost the same. It sent shivers down his spine. He thought about running and hiding, of darkness and slime. He thought about lights and letters painted on the wall, now covered up, and being afraid for his mom.

His mom's hand was firm on his shoulder as she looked down at him. She was solid at his side. Will breathed. The air was fresh. He forced himself to relax. He was home. He was back in his real home.

Will laid in bed later, burrowed under his blankets, but he didn't sleep his first night home.

When Will was finally able to return to school the kids there didn't call him brave. Their stares followed him around where he couldn't

hide. The nickname "Zombie Boy" started out as a joke that got picked up immediately by some of the crueler kids, never said in front of the teachers but in harsh whispers and notes and graffiti covering the desks and bathroom stalls.

Will already knew he was a freak, he'd been aware of it long before he'd ever been in the Upside Down. A little name without the terrifying connotations of the other names he'd been called for years shouldn't bother him so much. It did anyways.

When he was first adjusting to being back in the real world, Will didn't appreciate color as much as he used to. Everything felt too harsh, too saturated. The bright white walls of the hospital, the crayons from home that his mom brought for him, his clothes when he was able to go back home. It all hurt his eyes. However, as he spent more time back and his eyes adjusted, as his lungs breathed in air that was light and fresh and clean and his skin didn't have a thick layer of grime, Will began to love color again.

Color had always been one of his favorite things about art; how they would boldly stand out or mingle and complement each other on paper. However, the colors in the real world never seemed to quite match the ones that swirled in his mind. Now, though, he noticed the soft blue of a clear sky or the greens and oranges and yellows of autumn leaves, the rich hues of his own clothes that made other kids snicker behind their hands.

Everything in the Upside Down had been dull. There had been no variation, no contrast, just cool hues muddled down until they were almost grey. Lifeless.

(When Will started to see the Shadow Monster in the Upside Down less than a year later there was something different. The lightning illuminated the sky in a bright, bloody red. Even when he was grounded in the real world, when he could feel his mom's hand on his shoulder, he could sometimes still see the imprints of that red and the huge, dark silhouette on the inside of his eyelids when he blinked.

Will started using red in his art less after that. Unless he was drawing the Shadow Monster.)

Winter came and the trees became bare, the grass shriveled and dulled. The snow blanketed everything in white. It was better than the Upside Down but the clean, bright white like hospital walls still made him shiver sometimes from something other than the cold.

The first time that Will flashed back into the Upside Down he had been officially out of the hospital for about a month but he was going to the lab regularly to get checked on. He blinked and Doctor Owens, who was checking his vitals, his mom, Hopper, the white walls Will had been staring at; they were all gone, replaced with muted darkness and creeping vines and flakes floating in the air. Then he blinked again and the clean, white walls were back. He was no longer alone. Doctor Owens was looking at him in concern and said, "Will?" as if he were repeating himself. Will's mom was looking at him anxiously, possibly preparing to gather him up and take him out of there.

Will shook his head to clear it, blinked again, and everything was still there. "I'm fine. Sorry. I was... distracted."

Will dismissed the incident, not wanting to think about what it could mean, but his chest still burned from the Upside Down's air for hours afterwards.

Time passed, too fast and too slow, and then in was October of 1984. His "episodes" occurred more often but never for long. He had told his mom about it after the second time he flashed back into the Upside Down and his mom had told the doctor. Doctor Owens told them that it was in his mind, a product of trauma. Will ignored the feeling of grime on his skin, the ache in his lungs, and tried to believe it. He never told anyone about what he'd thrown up on Christmas. He didn't talk about the Shadow Monster.

Unease crept into Will and settled under his skin, a constant presence.

Meanwhile, everything in the party started being about MadMax.

Will was as curious as the rest of them and when they found out

MadMax's identity and Dustin and Lucas wanted to invite her to the party, Will was fine with it. He wasn't as obsessed with her as Dustin and Lucas but she seemed interesting and they hadn't had a new party member since they met Dustin. Well, except for El.

Mike was upset about Max joining for some reason, even though he'd been as interested as the rest of them with figuring out who MadMax was. He'd honestly been acting weird since Will came back. Since El... disappeared. Mostly everyone had been trying to act normal since the last fall which seemed to work for the most part, though there was an unspoken undercurrent that things had changed forever. If it weren't for Mike's abrupt mood changes or the fact that there had been a funeral service for Will, though, it might've seemed to everyone else that nothing had happened a year prior except for poor Will Byers getting lost in the woods for a week.

If weren't for the Upside Down, real now or not, seemingly refusing to leave him, Will may have been able to convince himself that it was all that had happened too.

Even though Nancy was dating Steve, there was something between her and Jonathan. Will didn't see it much, but when they were near each other they seemed to naturally gravitate towards the other. They would also look at each other and seemed to naturally just... understand each other. Then there was one time when Will was having dinner at the Wheeler's and Nancy passed a plate of food and Will swore he saw the flash of a scar on her hand that matched the one on Jonathan's. Jonathan had never told him about that.

Sometimes, Will thought that Mike maybe gravitated towards him. Standing close by or with a hand on his arm, casually touching him in a way he didn't seem to with Dustin or Lucas. Will hoped, sometimes, that it wasn't just Mike making sure that he didn't disappear again, like his mom might've. That the way Mike was with him was natural, instinctual.

Will knew, though, that if El were there she would be the one Mike would go to. It was fine, though. There was no reason for Will to envy that. If he did, it would be wrong. Unnatural. So he didn't think about it and he didn't think too hard about how Mike's arm around

his shoulder made him feel just a bit safer. Warm.

There was something inside of Will that had always been there, lingering, quiet enough that he could ignore it most of the time. It started to grow louder over time, though, ceasing to bother hiding itself. It manifested itself in the little ways he wasn't like the other kids, in the knot he got in his stomach when his friends talked about girls and he felt like he couldn't say anything without someone seeing right through him to something even he didn't know. In the feelings that started bursting in his chest when Mike looked at him softly. Will didn't know what exactly it all meant, what this thing inside of him was. He didn't really want to know.

The episodes continued and they felt so *real* but the doctor continuously assured him and his mom that they weren't. It made Will feel like he was hiding something, and like one day he was going to burst from all that he was holding in.

After the Shadow Monster forced itself into Will, Will was still there but he wasn't. He felt like he had to fight a losing battle just to be present in his own body and even then he had betrayed everybody. People had *died* and it was all his fault.

Then, he had to use everything he had just to tap his finger to send a message that the Shadow Monster wouldn't notice.

Will wasn't sure what would happen to him once the gate was closed, he just knew that the Shadow Monster had to be cut off. If anything happened to Will, he would just be collateral damage. As long as everyone else was fine it would all be okay.

Almost as quickly as it had started, Shadow Monster was gone again. The connection that Will had with him, even before he was inside of Will and had merely loomed over him and dragged him back again and again to the Upside Down, was severed. Will was once again alone in his own body.

Even with the Shadow Monster gone and the gate closed, there were reminders everywhere. The house was an absolute mess when Will,

his mom, Jonathan, and Nancy got back to it. The year before, the others had told him that the house got ravaged but he'd been in the hospital when they cleaned it up so he never saw the aftermath. Now, seeing his house so torn apart felt wrong even though he'd already seen it cold and lifeless and empty.

Not long afterwards, Hopper came back to the house and he had El with him. *The El*, the one who had defeated the Demogorgon and then disappeared. She'd been the one to close the gate and save Hawkins, of course. There was still dried blood on her upper lip and her gelled hair was a mess. Will's mom spent a long time hugging her and stroking her hair, making her hands sticky.

After that, El went over to Will and sat down next to him wordlessly with a small ghost of a smile that Will returned. She looked tired. He could relate.

Will and El sitting next to each other seemed just fine to Will's mom, who kept both of them in her eyesight. A very distant part of Will found this funny.

Steve and the rest of the party were gone and when they belatedly realized it, it was a cause for panic, especially because of the evidence of a struggle that they found. They all came back, though, looking rough themselves. However, miraculously everyone was still alive.

Everyone except for Bob, Will found out. One of the creatures that the Shadow Monster controlled had gotten him while Will was unconscious and that was all he was told. Will could see, now, the grief that poured out of his mom and felt absolutely sick with guilt. His mom told him quietly, firmly, that it wasn't his fault. Will didn't believe her but he nodded anyways.

Steve offered to take Mike, Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, and Max to their respective homes. "I'm driving," he made a point to say to Max for whatever reason, who rolled her eyes but didn't seem to have enough energy to argue.

As they were getting ready to leave, Jonathan went over and touched Nancy's arm and they looked at each other for a long moment,

exchanging quiet words. Then she left.

Hopper and El stayed behind. Will's mom sunk against Hopper for a brief moment and he held her up while Jonathan talked to El and fixed her something to eat.

Will went into his room. When he entered, he took several moments to look at the collection of crayons that were still out. The blues and blacks were broken and worn down to little pieces, the kind he always hated because they were hard to hold onto and use to make precise marks. The rest of the colors were scattered around the room. Looking at it made him feel vaguely ill.

His mom came into his room and over to where he was standing and she looked at the crayons too. "We'll have to get you something new, okay?" she said gently. Will almost protested. There were more urgent things to attend to than his crayons but at this point he was too tired to even say anything about it so he just shrugged.

(The memories of being in his body but not quite the one controlling it, of bearing down on the paper, of wax clinging to his fingers and getting under his nails all ran through his mind. It had a grainy quality to it, like he was watching one of the home videos Jonathan shot. He ran his thumb over a callus that had formed on the pad of his middle finger. It was still sore. The thought of picking up the crayons, to use them or even just to clean them up, made his insides freeze so he left them there and went back into the living room.)

They cleaned up the house as best as they could even though it was late and they were all exhausted. It felt important. Will picked up a few of the pieces of the map he drew, absently running his fingers over the crumbly wax on one of them. He balled it up with a slight shiver.

One of Will's clearer memories, after he'd broken out of the haze of scribbling and scribbling and scribbling, was Bob looking at the map and trying to help them find Hopper, not knowing what was going on. He didn't know *anything* and he still tried to help. Bob was such a good person, he'd always been so nice to Will, he tried to help Will with his "nightmares" and then with finding Hopper and then at the hospital and now he-

Will wanted to throw up.

As they cleaned up, he distracted himself by imagining his mom and Jonathan taking down all of the Christmas lights and wondered how they had felt. He wondered what his mom had been thinking as she covered the numbers hastily painted on the wall.

His mom cleaned up the glass and blood. Hopper and Jonathan buried the corpse of what Dustin had called a "Demodog" that Will's mom, horrifyingly, found in the fridge. No one knew what else they could do with it except for bury it. They all knew that it had to be gone, though. Out of sight. Will's mom then proceeded to throw away all of the food in the fridge and scrub the inside of it.

After he was back inside, Jonathan threw away their phone, which had been wrenched off of the wall. His mom watched him do it with the complicated look she always got now when it came to phones.

(Will remembered ringing and the Shadow Monster being pleased.)

Will's mom urged him to go to bed and let the others clean up but he stayed in the living room. El was there too, the blood on her face now cleaned up but her makeup smudged and her hair still a mess. They were all a mess, though. Will himself was still in the hospital gown, sweat cooled and grimy on his skin like slime.

El spent time surveying the room, eyes landing on various objects and people. Her gaze had a weight to it and Will felt that weight when she looked over at him.

It was odd, being in the room with El and fully conscious. Physically near her. He'd never actually met her although he had heard enough that he felt like he had. Her gaze was unnerving to him, though, and he suddenly didn't know what to do as she studied him.

"Will," she said simply, softly. It was the first thing either of them had said to the other that night. "I'm glad you're okay."

"You too," he said back. He didn't know what else to say, then.

El didn't seem to mind.

El and Hopper ended up staying over that night. Will's mom gave El an old and faded shirt that may have once been Jonathan's to sleep in. Will didn't want to go back to his room, alone, so Joyce let him drag out his blankets to sleep in the living room with El and Hopper. Will's mom and Jonathan ended up doing the same.

El grabbed his hand, gentle but still firm, and led him to lay down his blanket near hers on the floor. Will wondered if that was allowed since they were a boy and a girl but nobody stopped them, not even Hopper. They laid down and something about her presence near him calmed him in a way that he couldn't explain. It stirred a faint memory in him, of cold and fading, then a warm hand burning into his skin.

El, looking beyond exhausted, didn't take long to fall asleep. For Will, though, rest didn't immediately come. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to sleep or not.

He could hear Jonathan softly snoring somewhere on his other side and his mom and Hopper quietly talking in the kitchen. He couldn't hear what they were saying but Hopper's voice was steady and gentle. His mom just sounded tired. Defeated.

Will stayed awake for an indeterminate amount of time, listening to the murmuring. He found himself laying there, staring into the yawning darkness and thinking about sleepovers with his friends. They used to stay up as long as they physically could, whispering so that they wouldn't get caught awake past their bedtime. Despite his determination, though, Will's eyelids would feel like they were being dragged down by weights and he'd always fall asleep far earlier than he wanted to.

Now, despite the weariness that settled deep in his skin, Will couldn't do anything more than just lay there.

His mom slipped back into the living room some time later with Hopper. Will pretended to sleep. He heard what he assumed to be Hopper settling down on the couch while his mom padded over to Will. She knelt down and smoothed his hair from his forehead before settling in behind him and between him and Jonathan, a solid warmth at his back, and carefully wrapped an arm around his

middle. It made him think about how he used to try to sleep in bed with her when he was younger. It had made Lonnie angry, though. "*Only babies sleep with their parents, Will. You're not a baby, are you?*" Will had stopped after that. Then, just a few days ago and after the Shadow Monster took over his body, his mom had napped with him and despite the shame that sounded like his father speaking it helped, if just a little. It helped now as he felt her breathing even out behind him. Slowly, he felt himself drift off too, warm and safe again and surrounded by people.

The aftermath of the Shadow Monster and everything that came with it was similar to the previous fall but not without significant changes. His mom was still worried, still flitted nervously around him when he so much as frowned (she tried to listen to him when he asked for space but he could see how it was hard for her, how worry lines never entirely smoothed from her face and how she visibly relaxed when he came home). Now, though, every nightmare and flashback was treated as if it were starting again. It wasn't even just his mom, though; it was Jonathan and Hopper and his friends. Even, oddly, Steve Harrington on one occasion. Only El seemed to understand and didn't treat him like a ticking time bomb.

Sometimes, though, Will felt as if there were remnants of the Upside Down still clinging to him. Like the slime never washed off, like the Shadow Monster left a small part of himself to fester and rot inside of him. Will would feel a cool breeze and be back, the colors around him turning somber and the vines creeping in, growing and growing and ensnaring him. This time he knew it wasn't real, even when his chest felt phantom burning as if he were breathing in the stale, acrid air. This time, he was mostly certain that his mind was just playing tricks on him, like the doctors had said before. It didn't make those moments any less frightening.

He still saw the Shadow Monster's silhouette on the back of his eyelids when he blinked, sometimes.

The others, they called the Shadow Monster "the Mind Flayer". Just like the Demogorgon, they sorted the monster into terms that they could understand and combat.

Will didn't think of it as the Mind Flayer. It felt impersonal, almost, after what had happened. Childish to give something like that the name of a monster from a game. "The Shadow Monster" wasn't necessarily any less childish, though, Will supposed.

Most of the time, Will just thought of it as "Him."

Will returned to school. His mom had called him in sick for a few days while he built up his strength again. She would've had him out for longer but Will insisted on going back. He couldn't stay home forever.

Returning to something as mundane as school was odd after all that had happened. He saw it with the others, too; they were still on high alert, even when the most threatening thing lurking around the corner turned out to be a math test.

Max seemed to have it worst of all since this was her first time experiencing anything like it. She told the party that she was also on edge because even though her brother was leaving her alone for now, she never felt like she could let her guard down around him. Will thought about baseball games with Lonnie, seeing his dad smile at him and feeling hopeful like maybe things had changed, but also feeling familiar anxiety bubbling up whenever Lonnie started shouted at one of the players from the stand. He nodded, looking down. Max gave him a thoughtful glance at that.

Will didn't hear what the other kids were whispering about when he came back, but he saw them looking at him. "What's happening to Will Byers now?" they must be wondering. He wondered if it was entertaining for them. It must be if they were still at it.

Somehow, Steve Harrington had gone from "the douchebag dating Mike's sister" to "occasional babysitter and Dustin's new best friend" in the minds of the majority of the party.

Will hadn't been there for the change. He'd gotten explanations about it, how Steve had been the only available person at the time but then there were Demodogs and Max's older brother and the tunnels and

they had all bonded. Will had missed it and most of the trouble his friends were in had been his own fault anyways.

Now Steve was around occasionally, giving rides and keeping an eye on them if need be, even joining in on a session of Dungeons & Dragons a few times when the others bugged him enough. He always grumbled about all of the rules and numbers and having better things to do, but they all saw his face light up in genuine excitement whenever he got a particularly high roll.

Even when he wasn't there, Dustin was always rambling about how, "Steve says that girls like it when-" or, "hey, stop laughing, Steve told me this is the style now!"

Will didn't mind Steve being around. He was funny and even when he called them names it never had a mean edge to it. He usually promised not to tell their parents when they did something they weren't supposed to. One time he even took the blame when Will was home late and his mom was frantic.

Still, despite the fact that Steve would hang out with them as a group, Will couldn't help but feel like he wasn't entirely a part of it.

He hadn't been there in the beginning. Even after spending more time with Steve, he didn't feel like they had a lot in common besides being mixed up in all of the awful things that had happened in Hawkins in the past two years. One time, Steve had tried to initiate a conversation with Will specifically by turning to him after listening to Dustin lament about his newest crush and asking, "What about you, Byers, any girls you've got your eye on?" with a lightly teasing smirk. That had made Will blush and panic a bit before muttering something about being too busy. Steve had just nodded, expression going puzzled at Will's reaction, shrugged, and hadn't brought it up again since. Otherwise, he gave advice to Dustin and talked shit about Billy with Max and got closer to the other members of the party in little ways.

Will suspected that part of it also had to do with Jonathan. Everyone knew that Steve still liked Nancy and, even though he tried to act like he didn't mind, his tentative friendship with Jonathan was shaky now that it seemed like Jonathan and Nancy might be together. Steve still

gave Will a ride if he needed one but he never lingered for very long at the Byers residence.

Jonathan seemed awkward when Steve was brought up as well. Will wondered what the story behind that was. He knew that Steve hadn't always been so nice (there was a reason they used to call him "that douchebag dating Nancy" after all) but if he did anything to Jonathan specifically, no one talked about it.

There were a lot of things that they all never talked about. Maybe it was better that way.

One day in August of 1984, right before the school year began and a few months before Will got possessed by the Shadow Monster, Bob had taken Will, Jonathan, and Joyce to a zoo in the city. Will only remembered going once before with Jonathan, his mom, and his father when he was much younger. He had clung to his mom's hand half the time and the other half he watched the animals with wide eyes, face almost pressed to the glass of certain exhibits. They'd never really had the money or the time to go back since.

Bob and Will's mom had walked holding hands, laughing and smiling. Will had laughed with them, feeling light. Jonathan took his camera and spent time setting up each shot of the animals as well as taking quick photos of Bob, Joyce, and Will when their guards were down and their smiles were natural.

It was a warm day, probably one of the last truly nice days before autumn began in earnest. Will had savored the feeling of the sun on his skin, imagined that he was absorbing the sunlight like a reptile and it in turn banished any of the residual darkness from the Upside Down still inside of him.

Even on days when it burned and turned his skin red and raw, Will had spent that summer soaking in as much sun as he could.

November of 1984 turned into December. Nothing bad happened. The first semester of 8th grade came to an end and the plants outside slowly died. Snow coated the ground and everything was white.

Will wasn't sure if he actually wanted to go to the Snowball dance or not. School dances always seemed stupid to him and the times he did go he usually ended up sitting on the sidelines with his friends anyways. Why go to the trouble when they could all just hang out at one of their houses?

Everyone was going to the Snowball, though. Even Nancy and Jonathan were chaperones. So Will decided he might as well come too. His mom taught him how to dance which was pretty fun.

Will stood with his friends at the actual dance and he had to admit it wasn't bad. Dustin's new hairstyle was hilarious. Watching Lucas stumble through asking Max to dance was even funnier but also a bit embarrassing. Then, a girl came up to Will.

"Hey, Zombie Boy. Do you want to dance?" The girl didn't say the nickname in a derogatory way but hearing it stung all the same. He didn't really know her but she was in some of his classes and always seemed nice enough. She was pretty, he supposed.

"Um, I don't- I mean-" Will found himself stammering and he looked over at Mike in mild panic. Mike gave him a pointed look and nodded his head, like *go ahead, do it*, as if Will had been looking for permission or something. Which he hadn't been. Will wasn't even sure why he'd looked over in the first place. Mike nodded again and pushed him a little. *I don't want to* or *I don't know* or something else died before leaving his mouth. "I mean, yeah, sure," came out instead.

It was just one dance with one girl. It wasn't going to kill him and he'd been through much, much worse.

Then afterwards, maybe he'd understand it. Why Mike and Dustin and Lucas looked at girls the way they did, talked about them like they were some other species that they had to figure out. Why they wanted to date them. Maybe he just needed to do this and he'd be... normal.

The girl led him to the dance floor, putting her hands on his shoulders while he carefully placed his on her waist. They slowly started moving. This wasn't like dancing with his mom. He didn't

know if that was good or bad.

As Will shuffled around with the girl, he tried to smile. His face felt tight. His palms on her waist were starting to sweat. It wasn't... awful. Mostly just awkward.

He got the sudden feeling like he was being scrutinized, as if he had to do this right. He didn't really think that he was. Was it good that he felt as nervous as he did? Lucas had been out of his mind preparing to ask Max to dance. Somehow, Will felt like it wasn't the same.

The girl started to talk to him which made him relax a bit. It was still weird but he slowly felt less like he was dancing and more like he was just hanging out with someone who was not quite a friend but friendly nonetheless. Will talked with her about classes and the dance itself, looking at her but not making direct eye contact. Otherwise, it was honestly kind of nice to talk to someone who, despite the initial "Zombie Boy" comment, didn't treat him like a freak and just a normal classmate.

One song changed into another and they kept dancing. Will wanted to stop, honestly, but the girl seemed content as she was. He started to feel uncomfortable again. Trapped. He wasn't sure how long this would go on and the thought of dancing with her for song after song wasn't an entirely pleasant one. He still didn't understand why other boys liked this.

Will spared a moment to look around for his friends and he spotted Max and Lucas still dancing together. They looked not quite relaxed, but happy. In their own little world. He wondered what they were doing that made it seem so natural. The way they moved, the way they gravitated towards each other while Will started to feel like he was drifting far, far away. Or maybe he just wished that he was. Will tried to copy them, he moved his feet and smiled some more, tried to actually look into her eyes, but the longer it went on the stiffer he felt. The song dragged on. Will snuck another glance towards Lucas and Max and saw Max lean in to kiss Lucas. After she pulled away Lucas was grinning and Max even had her own small smile, a slight blush covering her cheeks. She leaned into Lucas, laying her head on his shoulder.

Will glanced around again and saw Dustin dancing with Nancy of all people. Odd. They seemed like they were having fun, though.

Then Will saw Mike. He was on the dancefloor now too, with El, and Will caught the tail-end of their kiss. It took the air out of Will's lungs for a moment. He should be happy to see her, happy that she was able to go. Maybe he was, distantly. However, a little stronger than that, something inside of him ached.

Will forced himself to look back at this girl that he didn't even know and for a terrifying moment he considered trying to kiss her. The thought made him feel vaguely queasy so he didn't. Instead, he waited until the song ended and then he excused himself.

Will still didn't get it. He caught a glance of Lucas and Max again, still dancing close together and sharing a private conversation with smiles that they didn't bother to contain, didn't have to, and he *didn't understand*.

There was a sense of dread settling in his stomach, once again making a home there, and not for the first time Will didn't dare let himself think about what this could mean for him.

He kept walking without direction, trying to find some nook or shadow that he could slip into, just for a moment. Away from everyone, away from the lights that were suddenly blinding. He felt like the epicenter of the light was shining on him specifically like a beacon, putting him in plain sight of all of his friends and his brother and the bullies and the people who only knew him as the boy who they had a funeral for. It felt like any second someone was going to notice him, to come up to him and say, "Hey, Will, I saw you dancing with that girl. Nice job, buddy, you're just like us now," or ask him how it was or remark that he wasn't fooling anyone, that dancing with a girl wasn't going to change the fact that he was a disgusting queer, that he shouldn't even be there, he should be dead, what a freak...

For a breathless, panicked moment, Will considered squeezing himself under the bleachers or one of the tables like he was still a little kid, curling up in any spot he could fit in to get away from his father. He almost did, even, until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He jumped around, half expecting to see Lonnie's sneer, only to see El. "Will," she said simply, and smiled. It was a strange sort of smile, small and slow, but genuine all the same and somehow it was so *her*. As she studied his face, however, her brows furrowed. "Something is wrong." Unlike his family and Mike, El didn't ask him *if* something was wrong, just acknowledged it as a fact and gave him an expectant look.

"No, I'm fine," Will lied, internally wincing at what felt like essentially his catchphrase now.

El was unconvinced. "Will, you don't have to pretend," she said in that deliberate way of hers. There was an extra edge to it, though, something she saved for when she felt like she was saying something important.

Suddenly El's eyes were beacons, illuminating and exposing Will more than the fluorescent of the gym ever did. He wanted to shrink away like a cornered animal. Phantom memories of a bright light, rope binding him to a chair and cutting into his arms, tears and Morse code tugged at the back of his mind. Like most recollections of his time under the control of the Shadow Monster, however, it was muted. It had been him there, but it also hadn't.

"I'm not pretending," Will said, shifting.

El looked around, then said, "There are a lot of people," seemingly ignoring Will's lie for now. "Sometimes I don't like a lot of people. Want to go outside?"

Will hesitated but it honestly sounded great. "What about Mike?" he asked, noticing Mike now talking to Dustin, Max, and Lucas. He shot both El and Will worried looks. The rest of them looked over as well although they seemed more curious than concerned.

"Mike can wait," El said before grabbing Will's hand and leading him out of the gym and into a mostly empty hallway. Will wondered what that looked like to anyone watching before shaking the thought away in mild disgust.

El sat down, her back resting against some lockers with her legs

pulled up, not caring about being in a dress. Will sat down next to her but far enough away that she couldn't touch him without moving over. Will sat there and as he breathed, slow and deep like Dr. Owens had showed him, he gradually felt himself relax. It was strange how comfortable he felt around El sometimes. He'd only been able to see her a few times after the whole incident as Hopper worked everything out, and they didn't talk much in those fleeting moments. When Joyce and Jonathan and Will would go visit El and Hopper, Will and El would usually just occupy the same space and it felt like it was enough.

They spent a few moments sitting there in silence before El spoke again.

"I still see the Upside Down. It's not real. 'In your mind' Hopper says. But it feels real. Hopper says that's... normal." El looked at Will and Will looked at his knees. "Do you?"

"I-" Will wanted to say that what she was talking about wasn't it, wasn't his problem right now, but that wasn't entirely true. It was that and something else and a whole mess of other issues that he didn't want to think about it. After a moment, he slowly nodded.

"I know," El said and she got up and walked over to sit closer to Will. He resisted the urge to move away. She took his hand and they just sat there like that for a few minutes.

When they went back into the gym, El headed over to where the party was gathered while Will noticed the girl he danced with sitting alone on the sidelines. He immediately felt guilty about leaving her all by herself. So instead of going outside and begging his mom to take him home early, he went back to the girl and plastered on a smile, pushing away his once again mounting anxiety. "Want some punch?" Will asked.

The girl looked over at him in surprise and brightened a little. "Yeah, sure."

Nancy was back to tending to the punch bowl and as Will and the girl walked over to her she glanced between them with a growing smile

that was dangerously close to becoming a smirk, though her eyes were kind. Will fidgeted nonetheless. "Having fun?"

"Yeah," Will lied. He'd never been one for lying but over the past year he'd gotten better and better at it.

"Well, don't have *too* much fun," Nancy teased with an ironic lift of an eyebrow.

"You either," Will said back with a pointed look over at Jonathan just to get Nancy to drop it. It seemed to work if her flustered look as she handed them each a cup of punch was anything to go by. As Will and the girl started walking away, Nancy called out, "Hey, tell Mike to tone it down, he's going to make everyone sick."

Will nodded back at her and, looking at Mike and El holding hands with his stomach twisting, he thought, *he already has.*

After a few moments of internal debate, Will looked over at the girl and said, "I was going to go hang out with my friends. Do you... want to come with?"

That seemed to make her happy. "Sure, Zombie Boy. My name is Heather, by the way."

"I'm Will."

"I know," she said and Will felt stupid for saying it. Everyone in town knew who he was. At least she knew that he had a name other than Zombie Boy. Not knowing how else to respond, he nodded, then walked over to where his friends were gathered.

They all looked between Will and Heather with varying degrees of interest. Will was getting tired of being looked at like that. "Hey guys. Uh, this is Heather. And these are my friends," he finished lamely, gesturing over to the party for Heather.

They introduced themselves to her individually and Will couldn't help but feel relieved that he wasn't the focus anymore.

However, Dustin came over and clapped Will's shoulder as Heather started talking to El, Mike watching a bit nervously. "You did it,

man," Dustin said as though he was proud of Will's perceived victory. Then, Dustin's face fell slightly. "Aw man, does this mean I'm the only one in our party that doesn't have a girlfriend now?"

Will's face grew hot. "She's not my girlfriend," he said a bit too loudly, which made the rest of the party as well as Heather look over. Heather looked hurt and Will immediately wanted to apologize to her but he wasn't exactly sure what for. She *wasn't* his girlfriend.

Dustin looked skeptical but he didn't push it. "Well, you're having more luck than I am, that's for sure."

"Then why did I see you dancing with Nancy earlier?" Will asked to change the subject.

As expected, Mike whipped around to look at Dustin and exclaimed, "You did *what*?"

"Of course he was too distracted by El to notice," Lucas muttered, though Will privately thought that Lucas had been pretty distracted himself.

They spent the rest of the time on the sidelines, talking and eating snacks. Eventually, the dance started to wind down and Heather said goodbye to Will with a peck on his cheek which caused his friends to tease him after she left. Will took it with a slight grimace and thought that maybe he shouldn't feel as awful as he did.

Jonathan met up with Will as people filed out of the gym. Will relaxed a little bit. "You have fun, buddy?" Jonathan asked him while they walked to meet their mom in the parking lot. Will wondered how much Jonathan had stuck to his promise not to watch after Will for the whole dance.

Will shrugged. "It was okay. Did you?"

"Well, I never went to my own middle school dances so it didn't bring up any horrible memories. Yeah, it was kind of fun."

"Nancy was there," Will said with a grin and Jonathan ducked his head in embarrassment but he had a small smile.

"Yeah, she was."

They saw their mom standing with Hopper, leaning against the car. As they approached, she looked over and smiled. "You boys have a good time?"

Will kind of wished people would stop asking him that.

They said goodbye to El and Hopper and then went home. Will went to bed soon after and he spent a long time laying in his bed, thinking about the dance and his friends. His thoughts and feelings felt all jumbled and tangled together. He wondered if they felt the same way. He didn't think that they did. Even within his own friend group, he once again felt like the odd one out.

(a/n)- I should be posting the second chapter by tomorrow or Wednesday.

2. Chapter 2

Christmas of 1984 came fast. They put up a small tree with some ornaments but no lights.

Will tried not to remember the sensation of something wriggling up and out of his throat. He drank a lot of water to wash away the phantom sensation of slime but it lingered there in the background for the rest of the day, occasionally making him gag.

Will always drew pictures for people with no specific holiday attached to them so he wanted to do something different for Christmas gifts this year. Jonathan had taught him how to make a mixtape so he made one personalized for every member of the party, one for his mom, and then one for Jonathan that he spent the most time on. Jonathan had opened his present, seen it, and looked like he might cry for a moment.

Will's mom and Hopper had gone in together for Will's present. It was a set of oil paints, really nice ones, a few canvases, and some new brushes. Will looked over at the new art supplies for a few moments, speechless, before looking between his mom and Hopper. "You guys didn't have to—" he said, overwhelmed.

"We wanted to," his mom said with a smile, putting her hand on his cheek. Hopper nodded with a small smile tugging at his mouth.

Will hugged her and then, after a brief moment of hesitation, went to hug Hopper too. Hopper hugged him back and he felt warm and solid. Safe.

Will spent the rest of winter break experimenting with his new paints. After a few practices, the first paintings he did were for his mom and Hopper. He gave his mom pictures all the time and he felt like the end result was a bit rough from inexperience but the expression she had as she looked at the portrait he painted of her felt special. Instead of the fridge, she hung it up on her bedroom wall.

Will didn't expect to see Heather again after the Snowball but she

caught him by the bikes one day after school once winter break was over. "Call me, Zombie Boy," she said, shoving a scrap of paper into his hands before rushing off with a wave. Will looked down at the paper in bewilderment. It had a phone number written on it, punctuated by a small heart.

"Looks like you didn't blow it after all," Lucas commented, getting on his own bike.

"Yeah, I guess not," Will said before shoving the paper into his pocket.

When he got home, he put it on his desk and avoided looking at it for the rest of the night.

Mike was over at Will's house, hanging out with him and El since the Byers's house was the one place besides the cabin that El was allowed to go to for now. Sometimes, Will found himself secretly thinking that letting him hang out with them was more of a formality than anything but he didn't mention it.

Jonathan was in the kitchen, fixing up some food for all of them, making sure that there was still enough so that there were leftovers for their mom when she got home from work.

The television was on, though Mike and Will were only half paying attention, idly commenting on what was playing more than actually watching it. El was enraptured. Occasionally, Jonathan would pop in for a few moments and El would tell him what he had missed, eyes still trained on the screen.

Though Will sometimes felt awkward around Mike and El, it was still nice to be around three of his favorite people.

At one point, Mike looked over at Will and asked, "So, are you going to ask Heather out or what?"

Will stiffened. It only got worse when Jonathan looked over and asked, "Who's Heather?" with raised eyebrows.

"She's nice," El supplied. "Pretty."

Will wanted to melt into the ground. Instead, he just glared over at Mike. "No."

Mike looked between Jonathan and Will, slightly bewildered at Will's reaction. Then he said, "Sorry, I thought he would know. You tell him everything."

Will looked away and shrugged. He didn't mention that he didn't tell Jonathan *everything*. "There's nothing to know."

"Why not?" Mike couldn't seem to keep himself from asking. "She likes you."

Will took a deep breath and then said, "I don't like *her*."

"That's just fine, Will," Jonathan told him suddenly, pointedly, a weight to his words. Jonathan talked like that with Will sometimes, like there was a hidden layer under what he was actually saying. Will wasn't exactly sure what to make of it. Then, Jonathan realized that he may have left the food for too long and hurried to check on it.

El had stopped being as absorbed in the show and was watching them curiously, Will especially. He didn't meet her eyes.

"I didn't mean to push it. I just want you to be happy," Mike told him, earnestly.

Will looked at El and Mike's intertwined hands. He remembered Halloween, Mike's hand on top of his. Warm and grounding. He nodded. "I am," he said, and it wasn't completely a lie but it wasn't completely the truth either.

The weather started to warm up again, slowly. Snow melted, the trees filled out with leaves, and wildflowers started springing up despite the still slightly bitter cold. Will went outside when the sun was shining and soaked up the heat, looked at the brightening colors. Sometimes, he picked flowers and brought them with him to Castle Byers. His safe haven was becoming a little cramped for him lately but he went anyways, relishing the comfort he got from a place so familiar.

Will dabbled with his new paints, creating pictures of rolling fields of green dotted in every color he could mix, the sky clear and blue.

Will kept the piece of paper with Heather's number in his backpack. He didn't want to look at it but he didn't want to get rid of it either. He wasn't sure what he wanted.

Heather waved at him in class or when he passed her in the hallways but didn't make any further moves. It seemed like whatever was happening was up to him now. So Will did nothing and the scrap of paper burned a hole in his backpack.

Will ended up caving one Saturday and telling his mom about it. They were watching a movie, just the two of them, when Will burst out, "A girl gave me her phone number."

Will's mom looked at him, mild surprise on her face that she quickly schooled back to neutrality. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Will shifted, rubbed his arm, looked back at the television screen. "I haven't called her. I think she likes me, though."

"Do you like her?" his mom asked him mildly. He wished he knew what she was thinking.

"I- no," Will said. He'd gotten better at lying but he never did seem to be able to do it to his mom, not directly. "She's nice but I don't want to, like, date her or anything." He cautiously looked over at his mom again.

Will's mom nodded and bit her lip before saying, "You don't have to date her if you don't want to. You shouldn't, in fact." She raised a hand and ran it through Will's hair, brushing it off of his forehead, a familiar old habit. "Just do what makes you happy, honey."

Will looked down. "Mike and Lucas have girlfriends, though. Dustin wants one. Shouldn't I want that too?"

Will's mom shifted closer to him. "Honey, you know you don't have to date girls if you don't want to. Don't force yourself to do something you don't want to because your friends are, okay?" Will could feel her

gaze on him and as he looked back at her, her eyes were wide and beseeching like she was trying to tell him something. Like Jonathan, there was a layer under her words. It made Will feel vulnerable, like the Demogorgon was after him again and he had to go away, to hide.

"Sure," he said quickly, looking away. "Hey, I, uh, I just remembered. El wanted some help with her homeschool stuff, apparently Hopper's no help. I'll be back for dinner." It wasn't entirely a lie, not really. El did need help sometimes.

His mom nodded but there was a crease in between her eyebrows. "Okay, honey," she said slowly, pulling her hand away. "Make sure to--"

"Call you when I get there, yeah," Will said, rushing to gather his stuff. He considered not actually going to Hopper's and going somewhere else instead like Castle Byers where he could be safe and alone but he knew that his mom would call Hopper and they'd be worried and he'd just get in trouble with both of them.

As Will was about to walk out the door, his mom got up and stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You know you can talk to me, right? About *anything*."

"Yeah, Mom," Will said, his chest feeling heavy.

She looked at him a moment longer before letting go of his arm with a slight squeeze. "I love you."

"Love you too," Will said, quickly walking out before he spilled every one of his secrets to her right there.

Will ended up going up to Heather the following Monday. She was at her locker, pulling out some textbooks and talking with one of her friends when he walked over. He almost lost the nerve when her friend turned and glared at him but he knew that if he didn't do it now he never would and that wasn't fair to her.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Will asked, shifting. Heather nodded and her friend walked away with a quick goodbye to Heather and

another scowl aimed at Will. With a slight grimace, Will waved goodbye at the friend awkwardly, not sure what else to do, before turning to Heather again.

Will swallowed. "You're a really nice person," he started and then winced as Heather seemed to clearly follow where he was going if her disappointed frown was anything to go by. "I just- I don't want a girlfriend or anything right now. Sorry."

Heather sighed and then nodded. "Okay." She started to turn and walk away but Will stopped her with a light hand on her arm.

"Wait. I- we can be friends, though. Like I said, you've been really nice to me."

Heather studied him for a few moments before nodding. "Okay, Zombie Boy. Sure." She paused for a second before asking, "You wanna hang out today after school?"

With the pretense of romance out of the way, Will found himself feeling lighter and he even smiled as he said yes.

Will started spending more time with just El.

Before he'd met her she was like a mythical being in his mind, powerful and untouchable, gone before he'd ever even heard of her but tied to him all the same. Now he knew what she was like when she got frustrated beyond the ability to communicate and that she liked Eggo waffles so much that she even ate them plain. He knew that she was a fiercely loyal friend, maybe to a fault, and he knew that she didn't always know how to deal with having an actual father figure in her life. She was still powerful but Will learned that she was also human.

El was not only human but like Will in a way he couldn't explain. Sometimes Will felt more connected to her than he did with the friends he'd known for years.

El understood him in a deep, unspoken way. Will, surprisingly, understood her too. He wasn't powerful like her and he didn't have

the same awful upbringing but he still knew what it meant when her eyes glazed over and grew distant. He recognized himself in her when the wind was a bit too cold and she froze up. He knew why she got frustrated when people treated her like she was made of glass.

When they were together, Will felt a bit more at ease. He didn't feel like he always had to explain himself or hide how he was feeling. He could just exist.

Sometimes, however, Will thought maybe El understood him too well.

El's vocabulary was evolving but she still had a particular way of speaking. She spoke carefully; in short sentences, each word carefully placed. She didn't beat around the bush and she didn't like when someone tried to change the subject. She got straight to the point.

In some ways, Will admired that. There were so many things that were bottled up inside of him that he wished he knew how to express; wished that he felt like he could express them. El almost always spoke her mind and in the terms that she understood.

Sometimes, though, she had a way of cutting through to the bone with a single sentence and it terrified Will.

Sometimes, El would study him, intense, and it was like she saw through everything and right into him. He could hide from his friends and his brother and his mom, maybe even himself, but he could rarely hide from El.

"It's not getting better," Will admitted to El one day as they sat at the table and drew together. El still drew stick figures to represent people most of the time. Will figured, sadly, that she didn't get the chance to draw a lot before. She was determined, though, and rapidly improving nonetheless.

El paused and looked at Will. "What do you mean?"

Will looked intently at the paper as he carefully sketched out some guiding lines. "Everyone else is moving on. I can't. I want to. But it's

like even with time, it just gets worse."

"Fester," El said, nodding. Her pencil dug into the paper a little. She said the word with a significance Will didn't entirely get but it made sense.

"Yeah. Fester."

"I don't think everyone is moving on," El remarked after a few minutes of silence, pausing in her own drawing and watching as Will filled in details on his. "Maybe more than us. But Mike tries to be too... grown up. Hopper is still scared. Joyce too. It's not the same as us but they're stuck too. Their wounds are still festering."

Will thought about it, darkening his lines once he got down the placement. "You're probably right. It just feels like I'm still stuck there while everyone else is doing something else. Like I'm here with them, but I'm not. It made sense when I'd go to the Upside Down but now the gate is closed and I still feel like this. Like I'm in a different dimension than everyone else."

El nodded and continued drawing. "Me too," she admitted softly. "The Upside Down never goes away."

They fell into a silence and Will leaned over, looking at her drawing. It was supposed to be Nancy, he thought, but the lines were heavy and dark. "Try loosening your grip on the pencil. It'll make your lines lighter and easier to erase, then you can go over them when you think you've got it right," Will advised.

El did, her brows furrowed in concentration. They didn't say much else for a while after that.

More time passed since the incidence with the Shadow Monster and Will still didn't go back to the Upside Down. He didn't even see flickers of it. Other than the flashbacks and nightmares, that was. He would still feel like he was there sometimes, though. There were times when his friends would be smiling and laughing and he would be too but then his own smile would slip and it would feel like he wasn't actually there with them anymore. Like he was a silent

observer, a spy, watching through a red barrier.

He preferred it to actually being in the Upside Down but it was still frustrating because this was a hell of his own creation and he didn't know how to make it stop.

Spring faded into summer and with it came the heat. Sometimes Will relished it, felt like it drove away the darkness and cold that had made a home in him, but sometimes the sun blazing hot on his skin brought back other unpleasant memories. His insides on fire, the heaters and Nancy jabbing him with a fire poker. Warm water and a primal feeling of fear.

Despite the fact that the warmth sometimes made him shiver and feel sick, he ended up deciding that he preferred it. At least this way the Shadow Monster wouldn't be able to find a home in his body again.

Despite Hopper initially planning on keeping El a secret for a year, that summer he ended up letting it get around that he'd adopted a kid named Jane. She was a distant relative, a second cousin that had lived with her parents in Indianapolis until they died and left him as the closest living relative.

(Will had heard a few older people comment on how nice it was that Hopper had found a family again. They seemed to think that included him, his mom, and Jonathan and honestly, sometimes Will wasn't sure if they were wrong about that.)

With the secret officially out, El was allowed to spend the summer out in Hawkins. The members of the party eagerly showed her around town; they all pooled their allowance money and went to the arcade and the movie theater, ate at diners, and went swimming. El loved it all.

Sometimes, though, it would get a bit overwhelming for her so they still spent a lot of time at any one of their houses (except Max's), playing games and watching movies. In public they called her Jane but when it was just the party she was still El.

Max ended up winning El over and the odd tension between them faded into an easy friendship.

El was learning more and more every day. She was still behind the rest of them in terms of public school education but she was rapidly progressing. Every day it started to look more and more like she'd be able to join them at Hawkins High by sophomore year.

Summer wended down to a close and the terror of starting high school took away some of the power that the Upside Down still had over Will, if only a little bit. In the weeks leading up to it, nightmares of going back, of the Shadow Monster whispering to him without words but with feelings got replaced. Instead, he had dreams about going to school and realizing that he left his clothes at home or that he was late and the entire class laughed at him but he didn't get the joke. Sometimes, however, his dreams would mix and he had terrors about being yanked back to the Upside Down in the middle of taking the test, looking down and seeing the failing grade and hearing a chilling, disembodied voice say, "*This is where you belong, see?*"

The first few days of high school were scary and overwhelming. The school was bigger and the teachers were stricter. After the initial adjustment, though, it was still just school and everything fell into a familiar rhythm once again.

Will stayed after class one day to talk to a teacher, telling his friends to go on without him. He was just getting on his bike to ride home when he saw Max with her stepbrother Billy arguing in the mostly deserted parking lot.

The people who were still milling about either didn't notice or were actively ignoring it. Neither of them were being loud but Billy had a tight grip on Max's arm as he leaned down to snarl something at her. Max was turned away as much as she physically could be, scowling at the ground as she talked back at him with clipped words.

Before Will could even consider doing anything, Max wrenched her arm away and stalked off, saying something furious to Billy before she left. Billy just rolled his eyes but as he walked to his car he

locked eyes with Will for a split second and Will froze in a moment of absolute terror. There was something awful in his eyes, something angry and tumultuous.

Will looked away before biking in the direction he saw Max head off to, heart still pounding. He found Max sitting, leaned against the wall of the school with her skateboard at her feet. She jumped a little as Will got off of his bike and approached her. Then she saw him and her shoulders relaxed. She went back to staring at her knees, eyes suspiciously puffy but only a little bit wet.

Will went to sit next to Max. She stiffened a little but let him. He wasn't sure what to say. He liked Max but he honestly didn't know her that well. She was Lucas's sort-of-girlfriend and a part of the party now but she still gave Will a sort of careful distance. He figured she wasn't sure how to treat him after everything she'd heard about him and what had happened last fall.

Max stayed silent for a few moments before saying, "You can go."

Will looked over at her. "Do you want me to?"

Max shrugged.

Will looked away. "I can walk you home."

Max sighed. "I don't want to go home."

Will thought about it for a moment before offering, "You can come to my house, then. If you want."

Max swung her head around to look at him then, face incredulous. "Your mom would be okay with that?"

Will shrugged. "Jonathan's working tonight so it'll just me and her anyways."

Max considered Will for a long moment before abruptly standing up. "Alright, let's go."

Will and Max made their way to his house, walking at first. Will rolled his bike beside himself and Max dragged her skateboard. She

was still quiet. After a few minutes, Will said hesitantly, "My dad used to yell at me but sometimes he was more scary when he'd talk really quietly. That was when I knew he was really mad."

"Can we not talk about it?" Max snapped and Will flinched a little.

"Yeah. Sorry."

Max stared stonily ahead before relaxing a little and giving Will an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about your dad."

Will shrugged, looking at the ground. "I haven't seen him in a long time."

They lulled into another loaded silence for a few minutes after that before Will, feeling brave, said, "I'll let you ride my bike if I can ride your skateboard," which made Max look at him with raised eyebrows.

"Do you know how?"

"No." Will grinned slightly.

Max rolled her eyes but cracked a smile as she set the skateboard down. "Here. Just stand on it, see how it feels."

Will leaned his bike on its kickstand and went over the skateboard, slowly putting a foot on it. It felt dangerously unsteady, like it might go away from under his feet at any moment. He took a deep breath and rested his weight on that foot to lift his other one up.

Then he promptly fell over onto the sidewalk.

Will sat there for a moment, stunned, before laughing. It hurt and the split second of falling had been terrifying, but a normal kind of terrifying.

Max looked concerned for a second before she laughed too. She helped him up, then coached him more closely on standing on the skateboard. Will got to the point where he was even able to go a few shaky feet forward before he realized that he should get home soon.

Will biked at a leisurely pace to his house while Max rode her

skateboard beside him, effortlessly cool. They didn't talk much but the tension had been mostly broken and Max looked happier. More relaxed.

When they got to Will's house his mom seemed concerned but she didn't fret too much. She welcomed Max in with a smile and Max ended up staying for dinner.

Afterwards, Will hesitantly asked, "Do you want to, um. Stay over tonight?"

Maxed looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Your mom is nice, but I'm not sure if she'd be cool with that."

Will shrugged. "I don't know."

Max sighed and shook her head. "No, I should get home." She paused, then added bitterly, "It'll just be worse the longer I stay away."

"Are you sure?" The thought of Max going to that house made Will feel sick with anxiety.

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Will nodded, and Max gave him a tight smile before she left, unconsciously rubbing her arm.

The next day, Max seemed down but during lunch she gave Will a small smile and shared a cookie with him. It was nice.

El soaked up information like a sponge; whether it was something people explained to her or things that she'd noticed on her own. She asked questions a lot. One thing she often fixated on was why things were the way that they were. She wasn't always satisfied with the answer.

Will didn't usually mind explaining things to El. It was refreshing, in a way, to talk to someone with a fresh perspective and it helped round out his own understanding. He preferred telling her about things relating to math or science, though. Indisputable facts with evidence backing them, things that made sense. One thing he didn't like explaining was any sort of social rule. Why certain things were "for girls" or "for boys" or why doing something was considered

unacceptable. He'd try but most of the time El's brow would furrow and she'd keep pushing it, asking why, why, why. It would get to the point where Will had talked himself in circles and even he didn't entirely understand.

(One time, Will had been hanging out with El and the rest of the party when some kids from school who were nearby had called him names as they passed, laughing. A second later, the one in the back who'd jeered the most stumbled and spilled his drink all over himself and the others. El had turned and walked away then, wiping her nose inconspicuously with a napkin.

Then later, when it was just El and Will at Will's house, El hesitantly asked him what those words meant. The names that the kids had called him. He had told her, a pit in his stomach, that they were words that meant "gay". She asked what that meant. He explained, trying to keep his voice as even as possible, but he started to fidget. El asked him if he was. Gay. She just asked, easy as that. He told her no, his stomach twisting. That it was wrong, unnatural. Bad. El asked why again and Will said, "It just is, okay?" a bit harsher than he meant. It was hard to breathe all of the sudden. The air felt hostile, thick. El didn't try to push it after that but he could tell that she was working through all of it in her mind. Will ignored it and avoided eye contact until she left later that afternoon. He desperately hoped that she didn't bring it up later with Hopper or his mom or Jonathan. He wasn't sure what he would do if she did.)

It had been a long day.

There wasn't anything in particular that had turned Will's mood sour. The morning autumn air was crisp as he went to school and it cut right through his jacket, making him shiver. His teachers droned on and Will found himself unable to focus, doodling absentmindedly instead. The halls were loud, filled with students yelling and chatting and it grated on him, made him feel like his senses were overloaded. His friends laughed and talked around him and Will felt disconnected from it all. Even Mike's occasional worried looks set his teeth on edge.

By the end of the day Will was just ready to go home. That was, of

course, when Troy and James cornered him as he was walking towards his bike.

They had nothing creative to say. Nothing that they hadn't been spitting at him since elementary school. They seemed to have built up courage again after what Will had heard El had done to them two years ago. Obviously they hadn't noticed her around town and thought that she was gone for good.

Troy called him names; fairy, fag, queer. All synonyms for the same thing, really. Will tried to ignore them but the words, the taunts, they rubbed at his already frayed nerves and he, horrifyingly, burst into tears before he even got to his bike. That only spurred them on.

Then, to make the situation even more awful, he heard Jonathan's voice. "What the hell is going on here?" Jonathan sounded angry. Will looked over at him, a hand covering his mouth as tears streamed down his face. Jonathan looked angry.

Troy and James made themselves scarce after that and then Will was left alone with his brother.

Will tried to stop crying but every time he thought it had died down, his chest would hitch and the sobs would start again. Jonathan put a hand on his back and told him, "Hey, buddy, you'll be okay. Alright?" as he led Will away from the school and towards his car.

Will got into Jonathan's car and shut the door. Jonathan got into the driver's seat but didn't start it. Will sat there for he didn't know how long, trying to breathe and get control of himself.

He felt utterly humiliated. One thing he'd dreaded about starting high school was being in the same school as Jonathan, that Jonathan would see something like this. Now here they were.

Once Will had mostly calmed down, Jonathan softly asked him, "Are you alright?"

Will shrugged back, looking out of the window. He'd settled into an odd and fragile sort of calm now and more than anything he just wanted to go home and rest.

Jonathan scoffed at himself. "Stupid question, I know. Wanna talk about it?"

"No." Will sighed but then he couldn't help himself. "You always tell me that being a freak is great. What if... what if it's more than that and I'm wrong, though? If the way I feel is wrong and I'm a freak in a bad way."

Jonathan had a funny look on his face as he looked at Will. He paused for a few moments, apparently trying to work out what he wanted to say in his head. Then he continued. "Will, the way you feel is never wrong. If those kids tell you it is then they're wrong, okay?"

"Did you hear what they were saying to me?" Will suddenly asked, voice unsteady, looking over at Jonathan again.

Jonathan paused, then nodded. "Yeah. I did. What I said is what I mean."

Will bit his lip. He felt nauseous, like something was crawling in the pit of his stomach.

"Look, Will, not everyone is going to understand you. Some kids, they're just jerks. Some adults too." The name "Lonnlie" hung in the air, unsaid. "What they say is wrong doesn't matter. What matters is that you're who you are, no matter who that is. No matter how you feel. Me and Mom, we love you."

"So you wouldn't hate me, even if the things they were saying are true?"

"Of course not," Jonathan said emphatically, his gaze intense as he looked right at Will.

Will wanted to push it but if he said it out loud then this would be real. It didn't have to mean anything like this, with everything going unsaid. It was just another one of Jonathan's big brother speeches.

Will looked away and said, "I'm going to ride my bike home."

Jonathan looked at him, brows furrowed. "Are you sure? I can give you a ride."

"No, I don't need one. Sorry. Thank you." Will got out of the car, absently waving goodbye to Jonathan, and he felt empty. When he got home he stayed in his room for the rest of the night. It was too cold outside to go to Castle Byers.

Will didn't want his father and the bullies to be right about him, he didn't want all of the awful things they'd said to him to be true. He didn't want to give them more ammo to get at him so easily. He didn't want them to win.

More than anything, Will didn't want his mom to realize that Lonnie was right all along and that Will hadn't ever been worth the trouble.

October loomed ever closer and the Upside Down crept back in.

Not in a literal sense; Will still hadn't had even the faintest flashing back since the Mind Flayer was cut off. It was in the way the cold burrowed deep into his bones, the way certain Halloween decorations gave him a slight spark of fear, and how he'd zone out more and more often. How the world, even as the plants died and the sky became overcast, was suddenly too bright. Blinding, surreal.

Will tried his best to be present, to keep up with school and spend as much time as he could with his friends, but sometimes he felt like he was drowning.

"I want to change my character," Will said to Mike after a session of D&D once the rest of the party had left. Ever since they were kids, Will would sometimes hang back as the rest of them got ready to leave and talked with Mike alone for a few brief moments. Will found some small amount of comfort in that not having completely changed.

Mike looked over at Will, puzzled. "Why? You've had the same character since third grade."

Will shrugged. "That's... not who I am anymore. I'm not sure if it ever was."

Mike frowned. "What're you talking about? You *are* Will the Wise."

"That's not true. I'm nothing like him, not really," Will bit out sullenly. He didn't really want to say it- he wanted to keep those words under lock and key but they were escaping anyways, out of his control. "I'm not brave or strong. I'm not like you guys. I'm not like El." Will shut his mouth then, knowing that if he kept going, no matter what direction he went he would really regret it. He already wanted to take his words back. It had felt good to say it in a way, but now it was out there and there was nothing he could do about it.

Mike looked at Will as he talked, frown deepening. There was something like pity in his face. Will felt shame creep into him. He was sick of pity. Then Mike said, "Will, you're one of the bravest people I know."

"What's so brave about hiding?" Will asked bitterly. "Everyone's always told me how brave I was but all I ever did was act like a little kid. I didn't fight the monsters, I just hid. And then when I didn't run away, I was controlled. Used."

Mike's expression became serious, intense. "Will, you survived more than anyone should have to." He paused to take a deep breath and then continued. "You want to know something? Whenever I imagine Will the Wise, I don't see an old man. When he's brave, when he's kind to others and helps anyone he can, I just see you, Will."

Will closed his mouth. He didn't know what to say to that.

"Change your character if you want. But don't do it because you feel like you're not brave like him because that's just not true."

Will stared at Mike for a few moments and Mike's expression stayed unwavering. Will then nodded and said quietly, "I'll think about it." Mike reached out to squeeze his shoulder, once, and then Will said goodbye and left.

Dustin was outside waiting for Will. He had stayed behind to bike with him. Will wasn't sure if that still annoyed him or if he felt relieved that he wouldn't have to go down Mirkwood alone in the dark. Will and Dustin rode home, chatting idly about the campaign

and school.

It was late when he got home. Despite that, after saying goodnight to Jonathan and turning off the light in his room, Will groped around for his pencils and paper as well as a flashlight and used his covers to partially block out the light that came from it.

He drew Will the Wise. He hadn't done that in a while he realized. He still drew stuff for D&D but more for the other characters than for his. Other than that, he'd switched to life studies and his own original stories. The Will the Wise he drew now looked tired, but still determined.

Will moved to a part of the page that was blank and tried to sketch a new character. Maybe a fighter. He hadn't really had an idea for a new character when he'd spoken to Mike, just something different. Now, all the sketches he tried weren't working out and Will felt frustration build up in him.

He looked back over at Will the Wise and thought about the last session when Lucas's character almost died. Will the Wise was able to save him from the brink of death and he remembered the glow of pride he'd felt and the look of relief on Lucas's face. He thought about being a cleric; a protector but also a healer.

Will put away his drawing supplies and then his flashlight. He didn't come up with a new character.

Will tried to avoid Troy and James, he really did, but they always seemed to be able to find him when he least wanted them to.

"Don't get too close to him, James, you might catch his zombie AIDS," Troy mocked as they walked near him and his friends in the hallway. James laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Will felt something in him snap.

Will the Wise was always calm and focused. He used his strategic mind to defeat the enemies. Will the Wise never got mad.

Will Byers suddenly felt like his blood was boiling.

Before he could help himself he whipped around and snapped, "Well then *leave me the hell alone!*" much louder and more forceful than he'd meant. Several people stopped and watched which just made Will feel more indignant.

The outburst made Troy and James do a double-take and then Troy just looked angry. He thinned his lips out before saying, "Fine with me, Byers. You couldn't pay me to get within ten feet of you."

"I don't care." Will turned back around and stalked off before the angry tears stinging in his eyes could escape, his friends walking fast to catch up with him.

"Will, that was awesome," Dustin said, breaking the silence as they left the school. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Yeah, it was pretty great," Lucas agreed. Then, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Will stopped, closed his eyes, and took a few slow, deep breaths. He could feel his friends looming around him. Then, he opened his eyes back up and nodded. "Yeah. I think I'm okay."

As they continued walking, Max said, "It felt good to yell at them, didn't it?" with a grin.

Despite himself, Will felt a smile break out on his face. "Yeah, it kind of did."

Will was sitting with his mom in the living room one night, her reading a book and him sketching. Jonathan was out with Nancy. When he had told their mom that he and Nancy were going to see a movie, she had smiled and Jonathan had looked mildly embarrassed. "Have fun, honey," she'd told him before adding a quick, "And if you hang out after the movie, make sure to be safe," before he left.

That was basically what she always told Will before he went anywhere but the way she said it had made Jonathan scrunch his shoulders up and give a surprised and indignant gasp of, "Mom!"

Jonathan had left some time ago. Will sat next to his mom on the

couch, his legs crossed with a binder on his lap that he used as a hard surface for the piece of paper he was drawing on. He was just sketching, really, little things that came into his mind like the curve of Dustin's smile or El's curls, Lucas's focused eyes as he aimed with his wrist rocket, the way Max stood as she balanced on her skateboard. He started doing a rough sketch of Mike's face but it wasn't coming out quite right.

As Will erased the bridge of Mike's nose again, Will found himself thinking about Jonathan and Nancy. He wondered if they were *together* together. Jonathan really hadn't outright said so yet but the way they were when they were around each other seemed to suggest that they were. Like magnets, pulled towards each other. Will and his mom talked about it sometimes and they agreed that Jonathan and Nancy were basically dating even if they haven't told people yet.

Jonathan hadn't ever had a girlfriend before Nancy. He didn't even really have friends at all before they started hanging out. Will wondered, suddenly, if maybe Jonathan hadn't actually liked girls before Nancy. He'd never really talked about them before that. Maybe that was it. Maybe for some boys, it just took a while. Maybe if he found the right girl, his Nancy, he'd stop thinking about-

The lead tip of Will's pencil snapped. It left an ugly dark spot where he'd been unconsciously digging in. Will tried to erase it to salvage the drawing that'd actually been turning out decently but that only made the graphite smear.

Will crumpled the drawing up, his movements a bit jerky and frustrated, before getting a new piece of paper. He sharpened his pencil again. It suddenly felt hard to breathe, like the air was thick and heavy. His mom, who always seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to his well-being, was looking over at him with her brows furrowed, book still open in her lap. Will could tell that the "is something wrong?" was just on the tip of her tongue.

Will put down his pencil. He looked down at the clean, blank, white sheet of paper in front of him and said, "Mom?" in a small voice.

"Yeah, honey?" his mom asked, already placing her book aside and turning towards him.

"I..." The words were stuck in his throat but he could tell that they were building up like a dam about to burst. "I'm... I think I'm. Wrong."

"Who said that to you?" his mom asked, suddenly looking angry.

"It's not just what people say to me," Will said, looking down, his voice still weak.

"Then what is it?" His mom's face softened, eyes widening as the concern returned. Will didn't answer. He felt sick with himself for being the reason that the expression was on her face so often. It was his fault. "Will, you can tell me anything."

The dam overflowed, just a bit. "You know what happened to me! That's not normal, it doesn't happen to people. And I can't get past it. I- I- I'm always scared that it'll just happen again, that something will pull me back there or that the Shadow Monster is out there somewhere, still watching me. Normal kids don't worry about that kind of stuff. I'm not normal. I'm wrong. And- and I-" Will cut himself off. He suddenly wanted to tell her, so bad, the words had almost escaped right there and then. He didn't, though. He was scared of what she would do if she knew. If he told her all of the ways that he was unnatural.

Will paused for a few moments and it was only then that he realized that his mom was right next to him, silently rubbing his back. His binder had been set aside. He took a deep breath and then he knew he couldn't hold it in any longer. "Mom, I think I'm queer," he choked out. He felt a tear slide down his cheek. No wonder his vision was all wobbly. "I don't like girls like I should. Like normal boys do. And I- I have these feelings that I shouldn't. I th- think I'm... Mom, I'm gay."

Saying the words out loud like that was a relief, in a way. He felt lighter, just a bit. Faintly, it also felt like a death sentence. There was no way to go back now.

"I know, sweetie." His mom pulled him into a firm hug, then pulled back just enough to kiss the top of his head, before tightening her arms around him again. Will froze, unsure of what to do. She pulled back after a moment, her hands firm on his shoulders, and smiled.

Her smile was strained at the edges, her eyes almost sad. But the dissonance didn't make it seem less genuine. "I'm so proud of you for telling me."

"You're not... mad?" Will asked, foolishly, a lump in his throat.

His mom squeezed his shoulders. Her smile faded, morphing into a look of determination. "Of course I'm not. I love you, you know that, right? And there's *nothing* wrong with you."

Will vaguely remembered his father shouting, saying, "*What, are you happy that our son is going to turn out twisted, that he's a goddamn queer?*" and then his mom's voice rising in response. Will remembered her holding him afterwards, running her fingers through his hair and telling him that there was nothing wrong with him. He'd thought that it was a reassurance that he wasn't what his father called him, that he wasn't queer, but now he realized that she may have meant something completely different.

Will let his mom pull him into another hug and he melted into it, feeling warm.

Things started to feel a little different after that. There was still a feeling of isolation, a fear of others finding out the truth, but Will suddenly felt a lot less alone now that his mom knew. Now that he'd said it out loud and finally accepted it as the truth about himself and been so wholeheartedly accepted as a result.

A few days after Will told his mom, she'd gently suggested that he could tell Jonathan. Will had balked at the idea. "Jonathan would be the last person to react badly," his mom had told him knowingly and Will knew that she was right. He didn't quite feel ready, though. Maybe one day. Maybe soon.

Will's feelings for Mike still hurt, a little, but it became more of a distant ache. He fell back into his easy friendship with Mike and hanging out with him and El started to feel less painful. He was happy for them, even. He hoped that he could be as happy as they were someday, although he didn't know how likely that really was for someone like him.

Will arrived late to math class one day, shuffling in with apologies and trying to get into his seat while attracting minimal attention. He scrambled to get out his notebook and supplies onto the desk only to find that his pencil wasn't in his backpack.

David, the shy kid who sat next to him, seemed to notice Will's predicament and passed him an extra pencil silently with a smile. It wasn't a cruel smile. It was small, but nice. Will felt something rise in his chest. It wasn't hard and cold, it was warm and a little nervous. It was terrifying but in a way that was also a little exciting.

Oh, Will thought, and smiled back, his cheeks a feeling a little warm.

He thought about that small moment intermittently throughout the day. It was hardly anything, really, but it was also the first time the way he felt about boys had felt nice, not like it was something wrong and abhorrent.

Will felt... happy.

Hawkins was quiet. For months, and then a year, and then a year and a half, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Will went to school, he spent time with his friends, and Hawkins stayed quiet.

Then Will felt it. It was subtle, just a prickle in the back of his mind. An inkling of something. It made his blood run cold. He went about the rest of his day but he couldn't shake it.

Then, it happened again while he was with his friends. It was still a small enough feeling that someone else could dismiss it but he knew that he couldn't. Will knew what it meant and he knew that it wasn't just in his mind. Something was coming. Hawkins would be in danger once again, and soon.

Will sat there for a moment, frozen. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin continued to cheer on Max on as she played a game. However, El, seemingly sensing his unease, looked over at Will. Will looked back at El and her eyes widened in understanding.

Will wanted very badly to hide. He wanted to bolt right out of Mike's basement, lock himself in the bathroom or bike straight to his own house. He wanted to hole up in Castle Byers, where it was small and cramped but safe. He didn't. Will looked back at El, then his gaze slid over to the rest of his friends, and he took a deep, centering breath. Then he straightened his shoulders and exhaled.

Hiding was what had kept him alive when the Demogorgon was after him. It was what he'd needed to do back then and he had survived until now because of it. However, now something else was threatening the people he cared about, the people who had cared about him. Will would not hide this time.